

In His Flesh and Blood
Ephesians 2:11-22
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I read an interesting article this week that suggested that tonight's text from Ephesians is actually something of a revolutionary manifesto in disguise, that those gathered to hear the letter read aloud when it arrived in Ephesus would have gasped, or at least raised an eyebrow, to hear such a direct challenge to the Roman Empire, and its so-called Pax Romana, or the Roman Peace. The Pax Romana was that more than 200 year period of relative peace in the Empire that began a couple of decades before the birth of Jesus and ended around the year 180, a period of political stability, economic prosperity, cultural flourishing, and at least in relative terms, the peace which gave this period its name. That famous census that provoked Mary and Joseph to travel to Bethlehem was called for by the infamous Augustus Caesar who successfully ended the constant Roman warring, and turned the empire's energies from expansion to consolidation. The very roads which made possible some of Paul's travels and the delivery of his letters were a product of this peace. In the name of this peace, there existed a tolerance of religion that allowed not only for Jewish synagogues, but temples of all kinds, a religiosity that actually made the spread of Christianity easier, despite the famous stories of the martyrs we read about. The world was at peace, at least from Great Britain to Asia Minor, the

bounds of the empire, and that was really the only place and the only peace that mattered.

But even so, in the midst of this glorious Pax Romana, the letter to the Ephesians injects its insistence on the Pax Christi, the peace of Christ, a challenge to the imperial order with the words, “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near.” But if the Roman peace was already achieved, if Augustus and his successors had already brought people together under one banner, if art and architecture and literature were all flourishing, if all the economic indicators were looking up, why inject this claim of a new peace, brought by yet another ruler? Why run the risk of rocking the boat?

Well, probably because Paul had a little better understanding of what constituted peace in God’s eyes. Because Paul knew better than Rome the definition of shalom, the Hebrew word for peace. Because Paul saw that the Pax Romana was really only the Pax Opulentus, or Copiosus, or Opulens, or

Fortunatus, or Dives, the Latin words for wealthy. You see, for all of its supposed peace, the Roman Empire was still a very violent place, especially if you weren't on the top of the heap. The foreign wars may have ceased, but taxes on the poor had increased. The political assassinations and civil wars may have ended, but that didn't mean the brutal occupations of the conquered territories had ended. The Emperor was still God, men were still lording it over women and children and slaves, heaven forbid you weren't a citizen of the empire, life was hard. The boot of Roman may have been polished, but it was still on the neck of as many as 57 million people who would have been counted in that same census in which Jesus found himself counted. Yes Paul knew that the Pax Romana was the Pax Falsus, and that God had something better in mind for everyone.

The context of Jewish Gentile relations, all that about the circumcision and the uncircumcision, about the commonwealth of Israel and the covenants of promise, all that provides Paul some cover for his subversive claim that true peace comes from God through Christ on the cross. After all, he is writing to Gentiles who are just coming into contact with a story with which he is very familiar as both a Jew and a Roman citizen, a story of animosity between Israel and anyone who was not Israel. But make no mistake, Paul is redefining peace, and the means of it, in a way which would have been very threatening to those committed to the ideals of the Empire. I'm not suggesting that Paul wants to overthrow the Empire. But I do think he wants to keep his new converts from falling victim to the belief

that the peace with the empire is easier than peace within the church, and if that means suggesting Christ is more powerful than the emperor, so be it. You see, if becoming a follower of Jesus means coming into conflict with other followers of Jesus, who needs that? That is part of what is behind this letter too, that exclusionary view of the Jewish part of the church that said that Gentiles were second class citizens in the Kingdom of God even if they were first class citizens of the Empire. And so why would a Gentile convert choose conflict in the church when there was peace in the empire?

So Paul gives them an answer, and that answer is Jesus, because in Jesus Christ is the only real and lasting peace, for both church and empire. And this is how it works. Paul is trying to help his people see that in the Pax Romana, peace had been established and was being maintained by shedding the blood of its enemies, while the Pax Christi was achieved not by shedding the blood of God's enemies, but by shedding God's own blood. The Pax Romana crucified people. The Pax Christi came through crucifixion. The Pax Romana divided its inhabitants into citizens and others. The Pax Christi united its citizens into a household of God. The Pax Romana compelled you to build a new palace for the Emperor, or a new coliseum for the wealthy. The Pax Christi invited its people to be a holy temple in the Lord, and a dwelling place for God. And all of this came to be through the flesh and blood of one man who freely gave himself for peace, rather than the flesh and blood of millions who were forced to do it.

And if Christ can bring peace to the world, surely Christ can bring peace to the church, and Paul reminds them of that in that great language of the dividing wall of hostility broken down, the triumph of grace over law, the possibility of reconciliation and peace among those who had once been enemies. There is nowhere to go but forward into this future Paul is telling them, this future of peace, this world in which there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, only one people in Jesus Christ. “So he came and proclaimed peace to those who were far off and peace to those who were near.”

One author has suggested that in crafting the Pax Romana, “[Caesar] Augustus faced a problem making peace an acceptable mode of life for the Romans, who had been at war with one power or another continuously for 200 years, [because] Romans regarded peace not as an absence of war, but the rare situation that existed when all opponents had been beaten down and lost the ability to resist.” That definition of peace struck me as interesting in light of what Paul has to say about the flesh and blood of Christ which brought the Pax Christi. He tells the Ephesians that Christ’s flesh and blood broke down the dividing wall of hostility, a metaphor that brings to mind the image of the stones of a wall tumbled down, ancient ruins crumbling, slowly but surely being worn down by the elements until nothing is left but a memory of a conflict that no longer means anything to us. I think that is Christ’s blood at work in us. You see, the blood of Christ is like the waters of the ocean that wear down great rocks to sand, washing over them time

after time, wave after wave. Like the stones of the dividing wall, we too are being tumbled and crumbled and reduced to sand by the blood of Christ, and when we look at that sand, we see that we really are the same, that there is no circumcised or uncircumcised, no citizen or alien. We might look at sand and be dismayed at the thought, that we have reduced to nothingness, or worse, a sameness, having lost our identity, but that is just the point. Peace under the Romans was the will of their enemies ground down to nothingness, that they might be more easily trod upon. Peace under God is us ground down to a condition in which we can consider no one greater or lesser than ourselves, a condition of humility that leads to peace for the simple fact that there is nothing to envy or covet or desire except the peace we have among ourselves.

Maybe there is nothing more boring than sand. But maybe too there is nothing more peaceful than sand. It is carried in and out by the tide without a care in the world. It has no worries. No grain of sand tries to rise above the one next to it, or break into its house, or control it emotionally, or send its neighbor's children off to war. It has no need to be anything more than a grain of sand to please God. Sand doesn't strive. But sand does serve. It gets mixed with cement and with rock and with water to become a home or a church or even a coliseum, but it never worries if it gets to be part of a storefront church or a cathedral, a mansion or a Habitat house.

Like much of Paul's wisdom to his churches, his words tonight are about identity and belonging and our ultimate loyalties. It is no secret that our lives are subject to competition, some of our own making, some of it thrust upon us. Whether it is by the dollar, the boss, the family, the ideology, or something else, we are constantly being pushed or pulled in ways that make us question our identities and loyalties. Paul seems to have understood clearly that much of that stressful, anxiety producing competition can be avoided or eliminated when we recognize just who God is and what Christ has done for us, that once we have our identity in Christ, none of the rest matters.

Christ is our peace. He has done for us what we cannot do, could not do through all our best efforts, whether for good or for evil. He has built us into a dwelling place for God in which we no longer remember whether we were Jew or Gentile, Presbyterian or Pentecostal, cradle Christian or convert. God is nothing if not maddening consistent, insistent in desiring shalom for us, that true peace of wholeness and integrity and well being, something no empire, however benign, can ever provide. Christ is our peace even under the best, most peaceful of governments and regimes, because no matter how peaceful the world may be around us, if we do not have peace within, we are still in conflict. Christ is our peace because it is not enough to have just inner peace, but also a peaceful society that lives out God's shalom. Christ is our peace because our grasp of both inner and outer peace is so weak and fragile, despite the enduring strength of God.

Christ is our peace because God knows we need it, and may God help us to find in the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ rather than any empire. Amen.